

# Telework in Australia



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Teleworking has been threatening to become a major form of employment in Australia for at least ten years. But until recently progress has been slow, despite the hype. A leading 2003 survey [Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia, HILDA] found that 17 per cent of Australians were then teleworking. This was well behind the USA [24 per cent] and many European countries. More than a quarter of Dutch workers were teleworking, for example.

Further efforts are now being made to boost teleworking here and the federal government has adopted a more active role. Earlier this year a new telework advisory committee [ATAC] was created to assess progress and develop new strategies. It will produce a final report by February 2006 setting out what can speed adoption of telework, what may impede it and what role government could usefully play in getting the best out of it. In advance of that report, its initial consultation paper discusses benefits that can flow from more use of telework. A threshold difficulty arises from lack of an agreed definition. Some use the term only for home-based work. Others take a wider view and include all remote locations, such as homes, branch offices, airport lounges and internet cafés. Similarly, there are different approaches to technology as an essential component. Most Americans, for example, cite information technology as fundamental to genuine telework, whereas in Europe any work done at home meets the definition. Diverse terminology [‘e-work’, ‘telecommuting’, for example] further complicates the issue. Clearly, one early outcome of ATAC’s analysis will need to be a widely acceptable definition of just what ‘telework’ means.

Among the benefits identified in the committee’s initial paper, employer cost reductions loom large. Potential savings are claimed in real estate and parking costs, in lower staff turnover, less sick leave and reduced absenteeism. It is suggested that an organisation’s chances of attracting and retaining quality employees will be improved if they can offer more flexible home-based work. And older employees — seen as critical in coming years — seem especially interested in this type of work. Examples from overseas quoted with approval include IBM, where 25 per cent of 320 000 international employees telework, saving the company an estimated \$US700 million in real estate costs. In Australia, telework may improve economic opportunities for non-metropolitan communities, reducing the ‘tyranny of distance’ and creating new jobs in new markets for regional industries.

Together with several discussion papers, an important resource for the ATAC Report is an extensive research paper prepared by the Sensis Business Index of small and medium enterprises and released by federal communications minister, Helen Cooney, in late September 2005. Some of its findings make for interesting reading.

Of 1800 organisations surveyed earlier this year by Sensis throughout metropolitan and regional Australia, more than a third now have employees who tele-work to some extent. Businesses in the Australian Capital Territory are most likely to have teleworkers [44 per cent]. Those in Tasmania are least likely [28 per cent]. The communications, property and business services sector [56 per cent] has most teleworking enterprises. Building and construction firms [21 per cent] have the least. The most-quoted barrier to telework was a feeling that it did not suit the particular business — 76 per cent of business not now engaging in the practice gave this as their primary reason. Lack of a broadband internet connection was also a notable barrier. More than half the enterprises with broadband are using telework while only 23 per cent of those without it do so. Clearly, this has particular significance for regional areas. 73 per cent of businesses and 62 per cent of employees reported positive results. Individual employees were far more likely to report positively than negatively about this form of work. Factors cited in its support include flexibility and the convenience of working away from the office, improved personal productivity, better communications, less travel time, improved quality of life and more time with families. On the negative side, a significant number of workers believe telework has increased their working hours. Some felt time with their families had been reduced, although twice as many were of the opposite view. Others said it had increased pressure on them to work outside normal hours. This correlates with separate research findings that employees regularly working outside standard hours are much more likely to be teleworkers. Perhaps surprisingly, only 35 per cent of teleworkers are women.

The government is obviously determined to promote telework strongly and there does seem to have been a boost in uptake in the past year or two. But maintaining and building on that progress will not be easy. That much is clear from the Sensis finding that only a further 4 per cent of businesses are planning to adopt telework, despite the fact that at least a quarter of employees who do not telework would like to. ■

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